



What are the skills required to build and maintain a successful business?

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What are the skills required to build and maintain a successful business?

Executive Summary

When observing different agricultural businesses and farm management styles in our own community, a question we asked is “*Why do some agricultural businesses go from strength to strength, while others seem to flounder and struggle to hold their heads above water?*”

This report begins to address that question and assists in understanding what is required to build a successful business into the future. It has focused on the inter and intra-personal qualities that contribute to building and sustaining a healthy enterprise. Rather than delve into effective farming practices and financial literacy (of which there is already much research), this report concentrates on effective culture, relationships, personal traits, skills and well-being.

While success looks different to everyone, it is vitally important for each business and individual to establish their own purpose and goals, enabling an explicit vision that will help define their own success.

Success can also be viewed in terms of sustainability and balance. Having a balance of work and life is crucial to the personal wellbeing of everyone in the business. Reflecting on your business and overall success is the sustainability of the balance you create.

In building a healthy enterprise, understanding the traits and skills required to operate a business with is crucial. Discipline, curiosity, humility, vulnerability, seeing problems as opportunities, optimism and passion are behaviours and mindsets that are of highest priority in succeeding in business.

Positive culture in a business will drive it towards success. Cultivating an atmosphere of acceptance, teamwork, responsibility and learning are critical to building high performing teams in your business. Communication is key to maintaining relationships and standards. Good people attract good people, therefore having the right people on your team helps with positive relationship building and maintaining the right culture.

One simple truth is that life is short, and we cannot afford to waste time reinventing the wheel when there are many business managers and owners willing to share their skills, experiences and knowledge. “It’s good to learn from your mistakes. It’s better to learn from others’ mistakes.” (Buffet, 2024).

This scholarship has endeavoured to take those learnings from others, inspiring change and a desire to strive for success on a personal level and in building a successful business into the future.

KEYWORDS:

Agricultural success, business culture, relationships, leadership traits, work-life balance, sustainability, communication, teamwork, learning from others, vision.

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Foreword

I have always had a passion for agriculture from a young age, which included a strong desire to one day own my own farm. I was fortunate to be introduced to farming by my father but being from a large family, it was made clear that I would have to make my own way, whatever I did.

After working in retail, studying at TAFE, working for my father and shearing, I began to make my own way in agriculture. Owning my first farm, at Nathalia, Victoria in 2002 consisting of 60 irrigated acres of land, I experienced both wins and losses. Through this I began to understand that to acquire more properties in the future it would require more brains than brawn. The thought was triggered, what are the skills and information I need to acquire to enable me to build my agricultural business faster, and sustainably?

As I continued with my sheep, grain and hay enterprises, I took more and more notice of what the better farmers in our area were doing right. I noticed that I was making mistakes that were probably avoidable. Jim Rohn has been attributed with saying, "You're the average of the five people you spend the most time with" (Groth, 2012). What I needed to do more of was associate with the right people, watch, listen and learn.

My Nuffield research was born from this hunger to learn and has enabled me to gain a greater understanding of what success in agriculture looks like globally.

My research is not only a personal pursuit. This research can help other young farmers, people wanting to enter the agricultural industry, and those already well on their way in their farming career.

My travel itinerary below incorporates domestic travel in Australia, my Global Focus Program (GFP), and other international travel and visits. In total, I completed 62,000km international and 14,500km domestic travel.



Figure 1: World Map illustrating travel during scholarship

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Table 1: Travel Itinerary

Travel Dates, Location Visits and Contacts		
2020 October - December	Australia	Gerard Hines – Delta Ag, New South Wales Justin Dickens – Speckle Park Stud, New South Wales James Male - Yerong Creek, New South Wales Shane Hall – Hall Orchards, Victoria
2021 July - September	Australia	Colin Burnett – Julia Creek, Queensland Emma Brown – Ämungee Mungee Station, Northern Territory Paul McLaughlin- Farms, Northern Territory Nigel Kerin – Kerin Poll Merinos, New South Wales
2022 June	Singapore	Australia and New Zealand Banking Group (ANZ) Bank Headquarters Andrew Cox - Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA)
	Japan	Shigeo Maeda – Popcorn Farming Yuboku - Wagyu Beef feedlot
	Denmark	Axel Mansson Farms Nordic Harvest - Vertical Farming
	Israel	Motti Harriei – Southern Arava Research and Development Kibbutz Ketura - Negative Desert Netafim Israel
2022 July	USA	Volleman’s Wildcat Dairy, Texas Santa Rosa Ranch, Texas Womack Nursery, Texas Tarleton University, Texas Dudley Brothers Herefords, Comanche Angelina Sawmill, Texas
2023 March	New Zealand	2023 Nuffield Triennial Conference: Chris and Jo Johns - Glenthorne Station Rhys Roberts – Align Farms Gundy and Lisa Anderson - Bog Roy Station
2023 June-July	Australia	Andrew Fowler – “Chilwell Farms” Western Australia Fritz Bolten – Oasis Farms, Western Australia

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Acknowledgments

My Nuffield journey has been an amazing learning experience. I discovered more about myself, human nature, business and agriculture than I could have imagined. My journey, as a life-long learner, will never end and I am grateful to so many who have supported me through this experience. Many people have contributed to make this research a success in various ways. I'd like to acknowledge them here.

Without 100% support from my wife Emma, I would not have embarked on a Nuffield scholarship in the first place. Her willingness to support me along the journey has been the reason I pursued this adventure in the beginning. Looking after our 6 children on her own whilst I travelled the world is a big sacrifice. Thanks to our children also, it is no small thing.

To our farm team members who kept everything ticking along when I was away, thank you. Dave, Paul and Andrew, I would not have been able to travel the world for my research with your experience and expertise.

A huge thank you must go to Nuffield Australia for giving me this opportunity. I would like to acknowledge the management team, including Jodie Redcliffe and Nicola Raymond, who always gave me great advice. To my mentor, Andrew Fowler, your generosity with your time and advice has been invaluable, thank you.

I'd like to express my gratitude to all our country hosts during my Global Focus Program in Singapore, Japan, Denmark, Israel and the USA. Additionally, to the many people and businesses around the world who were so charitable with their time, knowledge and ideas, I am most grateful for your generosity of time and wisdom; without you this project would not have any results.

Thank you also to the 9 scholars who shared the many experiences travelling around the world with me on the Global Focus Programme: Bernie Byrnes, Albertus Hanekom, Harry Kelly, Johnny Gardner, Tracey Brown, Antonio Bunster, Hannah Senior, Gareth Lamberton, and James Alexander.

This report would not have gone to print without the extensive input, editing, and encouragement of Fiona Chilvers. Thank you, Fiona.

And finally, I sincerely thank GRDC, whose dedication to research and innovation in agriculture is inspiring. Thank you for sponsoring me in this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

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Abbreviations

ABARES	Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences
ANZ	Australia and New Zealand Banking Group
AUD	Australian dollar
GFP	Global Focus Program
GPS	Global Positioning System
GRDC	Grains Research Development Corporation
Ha	Hectare
km	Kilometre
MLA	Meat and Livestock Australia
NSW	New South Wales
NT	Northern Territory
NZ	New Zealand
QLD	Queensland
ROAM	Return on Assets Managed
SPD	Shiny Paint Disease
t	Tonne (metric)
WA	Western Australia
WHS	Workplace Health and Safety

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Objectives

The objectives of my research project were to:

- Enable sustainable and balanced personal wellbeing while simultaneously being immersed in day-to-day business
- Gain a greater understanding of the traits and skills required to operate a successful business consistently for many years.
- Understand the role of culture and relationships in building an effective business model

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Introduction

In the agricultural industry in Australia there can be barriers to entry for those starting out and those with limited equity. These barriers can include the price of land, input costs comparative to commodity prices, scale, experience, and limited older farmers willing to partner with younger farmers in leasing or share agreements.

In order to get into farming, it requires a certain skill set. The skills required to build your business will not all come naturally, most will be learned. As Warren Buffet has said, "It's good to learn from your mistakes. It's better to learn from others' mistakes ". (Buffet, 2024)

The average age of farmers in Australia was 58 years in 2018, with 37 years' experience (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Young people entering farming are disadvantaged by a lack of experience, knowledge and skills that their older counterparts have acquired over time.

This experience and knowledge can be passed on in family farming businesses, but those who have not come from a farming childhood may not have access to such experience.

Farming is a unique business where the workplace can also be the home. There can be many generations living on the farm and working in the farming business. The farming lifestyle can have positive aspects such as enjoying the location, raising family on the farm and walking out the back door to work. Negative aspects to the farm lifestyle could include increased stress during problem times or drought; opportunity to continue working long hours because of location; and difficulty switching off.

How is a balance between the positive and negative achieved and sustained? Enabling sustainable and balanced personal wellbeing in farming is essential, but a business will not last long unless it is also financially viable.

According to the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences (ABARES), the average ROAM has been 1.2% for Australian mixed-farming enterprises over the last 33 years (Ryder, 2023). This average forecast return is insufficient for those starting out in agriculture, who are seeking to purchase land. For example, a bank is not going to offer funding when acquiring your first farm loan if that 1.2% ROAM is all you believe you can return. Considering interest rates have varied from 2.5% - 6.5% over the last decade, one needs to be aiming to achieve these numbers as a minimum to remain in a vibrant state of growth. The graph below, provided by Eric Nankivell, Agribusiness Consultant at Farmanco (Farmanco, 2023), shows that, within his client base there are agribusiness managers achieving excellent ROAM. Of his 275 clients, the top 25% have achieved an average of 9.36% operational return on investment over a 25-year period, whilst the average achieved 3.79% ROAM.

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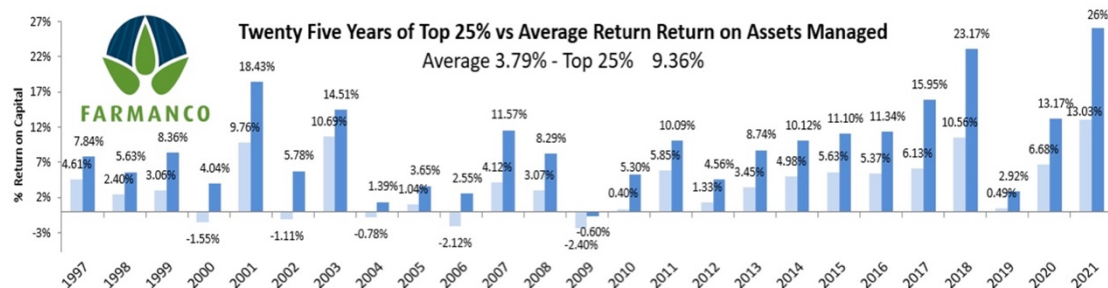


Figure 2. FARMANCO return on assets managed (Farmanco, 2023)

“Agribusiness is like a game, it is not much fun when you are losing” (Milbank, 2020). Agriculture is an industry that is very unforgiving, where, in most instances, you only get one chance to grow one good crop of wheat, lambs, calves etcetera per year. This creates the situation where you may only get 20 - 40 opportunities to roll the dice throughout your lifetime. With this in mind, one needs to learn as much as possible in a very short timeframe to ensure maximum growth with minimal setbacks.

This report seeks to show how success comes from life-long learning and is not based on fixed knowledge or learning. It is a journey, something that can be aspired to, achieved, maintained and built upon. The author has discovered, in order to grow a farming business, it takes the right balance of personal attributes and business knowledge and skills such as (see below):

Table 2: Personal and Business skills and attributes (Amery, Jarrod)

Traits and skills	Balance and sustainability
Vision, goals and purpose	Sustainability
Discipline	Healthy relationships
Timing and attention to detail	
Curiosity and humility	
Seeing problems as opportunities	
Passion and optimism	

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Chapter 1: Sustainable and balanced personal wellbeing

Sustainability

The term sustainability has many connotations; at the heart of the word, it means to sustain over a period of time. In business there are a range of ways to consider and improve sustainability. This includes the Three Ps (People, Planet and Profit), the Three Cs (Conservation, Community and Circular Economy) as well as certain behaviours and mindsets. This report will specifically be focusing on behaviours such as discipline, attention to detail, work/life balance, patience, reflection, and consistency, that can be sustained over years and decades within a business.

There is a saying, *consistency is better than excellence*, which rings true when building a sustainable business. It is great to be excellent in all things business, but at what cost? Can it be sustained, and does it focus on excellence in other qualities, such as problem solving, and confidence and autonomy within the workplace? This scholarship has explored the importance of what it takes to be in the game of business for the long haul (sustainable) and to enjoy the journey while retaining a positive work, life, and family balance.

This report delves into the importance of healthy relationships which are important in creating a sustainable workplace. Whether it's family, staff, customers, or business partnerships; genuine solid relationships are imperative for long term business success. Overall, this report explores the skills farmers need to develop and hone to see business go from good to great, this ranges from the personal attributes and traits of an individual to the culture of a business and the relationships that make it work.

Balance

The word success brings up a plethora of images in one's mind as to what success looks like. It could be the number of letters behind one's name, the number of hours one works in a week, what school you send your children to, or all the new machinery in your neighbour's shed. Increasingly, one's success is also viewed in terms of the balance that exists between work and life.

Ultimately, each individual and each business needs to define what success is for them. This is an extremely important decision to make and will change slightly over time. After all, some people have vigorously climbed the ladder of success only to find once getting to the top, after many years of hard work, that the ladder they are climbing was leaning against the wrong building. Time is a non-renewable resource, and many do not take the time to understand this until too late in life or when a tragedy unexpectedly strikes (a loved one dies, for example). It is vitally important in pursuing

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success to define what success looks like and what you are embarking on has a strong purpose.

An example of leaning the ladder against the wrong building can be business foci; like the example of all the new machinery in one shed. Paul McLaughlin of Desert Farms, Northern Territory (NT) talked about being careful of SPD (shiny paint disease). He went on to say that SPD has caught many farmers out. Some farmers can become so intent on keeping an image, that they can ultimately be working for the machinery company busy just keeping up with repayments, working long hours, and losing life's balance.

Shigeo Maeda of Japan was a positive model of maintaining a balance between business and family. When I visited him, he and his son, had just returned home from the United States of America (USA). He had spent 2 weeks visiting corn growers & understanding new innovative practices to improve his own business. Shigeo's son was of school age with no input in farm decision-making but to Shigeo, business and family go hand in hand, it is not possible to have one without the other. A strong bond with his wife and children takes front seat in his order of life's demanding priorities. (Maeda, 2022).

Emma Brown, "Amungee Mungee" NT, a highly successful businesswoman said "*It is important to play with your kids when they are young, and they'll stay with you when you're old*". I saw this demonstrated by her first-hand as we met up with her in Katherine at the Katherine Show Gymkhana. She and her husband, Adrian, had come to enjoy some quality time together, with their children, and with the community. This demonstrates an intention to maintain the work – life balance.

Mitch Pollock operates 3000ha of broad acre farming at Caragabal, NSW. Mitch and his wife Karen have 2 children, aged 12 and 14yrs. After his wife recovered from cancer, he had a different perspective on the way he went about spending his time and money. Mitch said that regardless of the year it has been on the farm (good or bad), he always heads away on a decent holiday every year and a couple of smaller 4–5-day breaks throughout the year. Mitch said that it is important to get away, even if it is just camping for 2 weeks an hour or so away from the farm. Mitch also commented on how their personal spending habits changed. They always intended putting an in-ground pool in but thought that this would be a long-term project but since Karen's cancer scare Mitch sees family time and connection as highly important. They stopped delaying the installation of the pool which his whole family now enjoys. "It's always hard to buy something when you know it is not going to make you money, but it is an investment into your family into the future," Mitch says.

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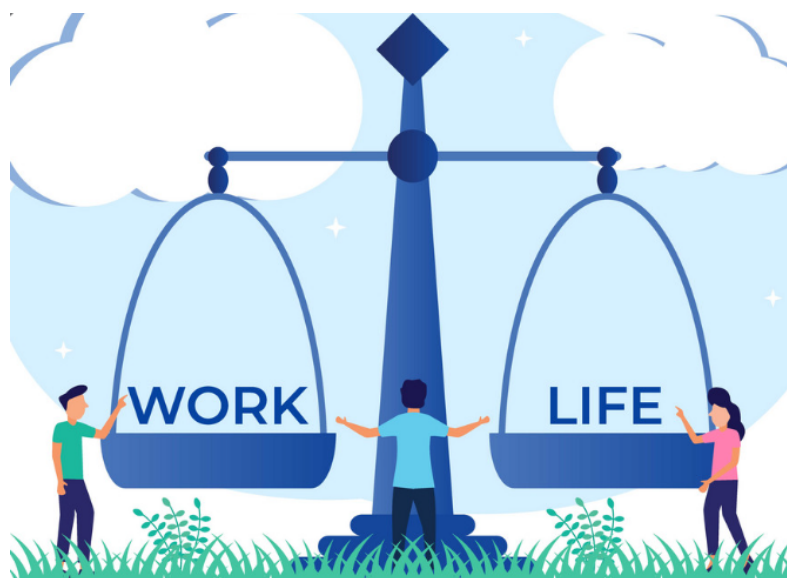


Figure 3: Work life balance (HireVeda)

My Nuffield travels provided different examples of the ways farmers prioritised a balance between their work life and their life outside of work (often referred to as the work | life balance). This can be a challenge of note in agriculture where there is a significant overlap between the home and the workplace, family discussion and discussions about the business and, how family, social and work activities are coordinated. As Figure 3, above, suggests, the aim is to manage and maintain a balance between our work life and social and family life. Potentially, in farming finding the right balance will come from integration rather than separation. Instead of being separately balanced on the scales, aspects of life such as play, and family are an integral part of the entire business dynamic. For farming families, where the place of work overlaps where people live, this is particularly important. Taking family members on the journey within the business from, often a young age, is a way this can be done, as in the case of Shigeo. Examples of this can include a parent teaching a child how to put the milking cups on the cows in the dairy or a parent teaching them to drive a tractor and navigate with Global Positioning System/s (GPS). The process of educating a child or any family member is not just the process of teaching an individual a job but explaining the purpose, why and how the job gets done. With the intention of interacting and growing stronger relationships with family members it also offers a learning opportunity on the path to developing individuals into highly trained family/team members.

Chapter 2: Traits and skills

Understanding one's ROAM helps identify and measure efficiency in using farm assets to create income. Good farmers seek to increase business operational return. You do not have to hang around the agricultural industry long before you will hear someone state that farming is a business of being "asset rich, cash poor". There may be a degree of truth to this statement, but it is not true for all. This report, however, does not seek to delve into financial literacy; rather than focusing on business and farming, it explores the skills and dispositions an individual must have to achieve one's quest to build a successful business.

Traits

It is impossible to build a successful business without developing positive traits. Some will come more naturally to some than others. By developing these traits over time, one will position themselves to see success come their way. This report seeks to identify and explore a range of traits and their benefits. These traits include:

- Visions, goals and purpose
- Discipline
- Timing and attention to detail
- Curiosity, humility and vulnerability
- See problems as opportunities
- Optimism
- Passion

Vision, goals, and purpose

One mistake leaders make is to undervalue the importance of vision. There is a proverb (Proverbs 29:18) that states, "Where there is no vision, the people perish". This does not necessarily mean that they will perish physically but the purpose behind what they are doing certainly will dry up without a vision or goal to work towards. Whilst in Texas I caught up with Larry Don Womack who was growing grape vines, citrus trees, fruit trees and much more. He was growing these plants from seeds to seedlings ready for people to plant out. He called it a low volume, high profit business but the thing that stood out the most was when he said, "You need to ask yourself the why, what's our reason for getting out of bed in the morning?" Larry's strong generational ties to his farming business were his strongest motivation, his "why". (Womack, 2022)

Also in Texas, we visited Frank Volleman's dairy farm. Frank and his family milked 5000 cows with 45,000 gallons of milk produced per day, on 4000 acres. They also employed a total of 110 people within their business. Frank had migrated from The Netherlands where opportunities to expand his dairy farm were limited due to being landlocked. He had a vision to one day provide an opportunity for his 4 boys to work in the family business, if they chose to do so in the future. In order to do this, he needed to develop scale within his business to make this happen. This vision informed his decision to move to the US so that he could grow his business. Frank had vision, which created purpose, which created determination to see his 4 sons, and now daughters-in-law, all take an important role in their rapidly expanding agricultural business. Today, Frank's eldest son runs the farm. His second son oversees farm operations, and the

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third son (and his wife) run the newly developed milk bottling plant. The fourth son is busy incorporating his uncle's farm into the business to create further scale to their already large 5000 cow, 50,000 bottle per day enterprise.

Shigeo Maeda, who farms 140ha at Hokkaido, Japan, was another amazing agricultural inspiration who had a great sense of vision and purpose. His family was one of the earliest pioneers to leave the main island of Japan for the undeveloped island of Hokkaido. His family settled 1600 hectare (ha) in the late 1800s, grew potatoes and owned a potato starch factory. In World War 2 their potato starch factory was bombed by Americans as they unloaded any unused bombs before landing planes back onto nearby aircraft carriers. After the war had ended, the Japanese government forcibly acquired almost their entire farm and left them with 6ha. The farm was divided up into soldier settlement blocks and shared among many returned service men. Shigeo's vision is to see his family's farm return to its former size. With Shigeo's Vision clearly in mind, he has so far purchased 140 ha of the 1600ha which is an amazing achievement considering land is expensive and there is so little of it in Japan. This is the demonstration of having clear vision, goal, and purpose.

Discipline

Travelling around the world, one of the common traits of successful businesspeople was that they were disciplined. This discipline helped them achieve and pursue their goals; both in their businesses and personal lives. Some disciplines observed included eating well, maintaining physical and mental health, sleep hygiene, financial, social, family and self-care. To some people these aspects of discipline may go largely unnoticed, but it is often a number of small disciplines that accumulate to have a positive compounding effect over one's lifetime. In life we will either live by priorities or pressure, it is our choice. Preparation and discipline prevent pressure, whereas procrastination produces pressure. As Jim Rohn argued "We must all suffer from one of two pains: the pain of discipline or the pain of regret," (Rodenhizer, 2019).

American social psychologist Roy Baumeister found that willpower is like a muscle that becomes fatigued from overuse. Basically, his research suggests that willpower is a limited resource. Baumeister says that people who succeed do not have more willpower than you: they just develop better daily routines, habits, and disciplines, which after a while become automatic and require less thought-less conscious energy. (Baumeister, 2012)

While travelling Australia amidst Covid 19, unable to travel the world, we went to Amungee Mungee Station, 80km east of Daly Waters, Northern Territory (NT). Adrian and Emma Brown own 2 properties across 1.32 million ha. Both Adrian and Emma are very sharp and astute businesspeople. I could tell by talking with Emma that she was not someone to shy away from pain, essentially this is what being disciplined is. As the saying goes, "No pain, no gain". Emma explained that she has chosen a lifestyle of only eating once per day; she called it fast, feast, repeat. Our visit coincided with lunchtime, and she kindly offered to feed our whole family before we set off to Katherine. I could not help but notice that her fridge and pantry were full of healthy, nutritious food. We ate like kings on fresh salads and cold meats, and with the closest decent supermarket being almost 400km away, she had every good reason to have a

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house full of junk food. She did mention to us that she kept no sweet food like cakes and biscuits in her house so that it made it easier to stick to her disciplined lifestyle.

Having met with farmers from around the world leads me to believe, having discipline in one area of your life, like Emma, will be indicative of discipline in most areas of your life. At the root of discipline is delayed gratification, and this is the question one needs to ask themselves. Do I want to live a lifestyle of instant gratification or delayed gratification? The choice is yours.

“The successful person has a habit of doing the things failures don’t like to do; successful individuals don’t like to do them either, necessarily. But their disliking is subordinated to the strength of their purpose.” (Covey, 1989).

Andrew Fowler (Australian Nuffield Scholar) believes discipline and attention to detail contribute to a business’s success. “Being in the right place at the right time with all our people and machinery is essential to get the job done because effectively good farming is so much about timing. Most people are doing essentially the same things. It is just when and how you do them that sets you apart from everyone else.” (Fowler, 2023).

Curiosity, humility and vulnerability

The traits of curiosity, humility and vulnerability, are necessary and effective in running and leading a business. They are a vital ingredient for growth; to be humble and vulnerable enough to ask a question is a pathway to success. They assist in minimising mistakes and contribute to a positive workplace culture. The capacity to ask questions supports curiosity and contributes to better problem solving, and the generation and development of new ideas.

From 2013-2014, Shigeo was determined to grow corn for popping. He planted some seeds but, according to him, it was the poorest popcorn in the world. This is because there are not enough heat units to grow popcorn successfully in Japan, which means Shigeo’s corn grows into the frosty time of the year, and his corn kernels achieve a poor pop ratio. So, with his amazing curiosity, Shigeo found a grower in Ireland doing something similar and decided to have a look. Successful people are humble enough to listen thoughtfully and ask many questions. He found that this farmer was sowing his popcorn 2-3 weeks earlier than recommended and putting biodegradable plastic over the ground to warm the soil by an extra 5 degrees, which got the corn up and out of the ground early. Shigeo’s humility, coupled with his curiosity enabled him to learn the production method and replicate that same approach on his farm. He shortened the growing season of his corn, harvesting before the first frost of the season and packaging superior popcorn.

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Figure 4: Popcorn in Japan (Source: Author)

Whilst on the GFP in Denmark we visited Mansson Farm (owned and run by Axel Mansson). Mansson Farm was a large 1800ha farm which produced 34 organic crops and 5 conventional crops. Axel's philosophy was, "See opportunities, have the guts to give it a go and the finance to back yourself" (Mansson, 2022). Just a few weeks prior to our GFP visit to his farm his curiosity landed him an opportunity to get into the radish growing industry. After having had a conversation with a neighbouring horticultural grower he became aware that his neighbour was wanting to get out of the industry. Axel and his team had no prior experience in growing, harvesting, and packaging radish so they entered an agreement where they got training from this neighbouring grower and made a financial transaction for the machinery required for the job. Included in that agreement was the training required to grow radishes successfully. This was a successful outcome for all parties involved but it took the three ingredients discussed above. Curiosity to find the opportunity in the first place, and the humility and vulnerability to say that they had no clue on how to grow radish and can we please learn from you. If farmers are curious enough to find opportunities like this, it is a win, win for all parties involved.

See problems as opportunities

Often when facing a problem, the chances are you most likely are not the only one. The difference is some people look beyond the problem and see an opportunity. Problems can equal opportunities, which can lead to successful outcomes. It is a bit like Thomas Edison's light bulb invention. Everyone had the same issue, relying on candles or lanterns for lighting. Most just thought that was the norm but not Edison. After 2774 attempts of making a light bulb filament he succeeded.

Shigeo Maeda of Japan had experienced an ongoing problem in relation to staffing retention. Shigeo explained that he would employ people over the warmer months on his farm but when the snow came in the winter months the farm would go into a dormancy, and he would lay his staff off for the winter with there being no outdoor work to be done. The challenge being that when the weather warmed into the spring and the farm came out of its dormancy Shigeo would have to hire a whole new crew of staff. This is a constant problem for farmers in Hokkaido and this problem got him thinking as to what opportunities might be out there to enable him to employ staff all year round without having to make them redundant in the winter months. Shigeo also observed that there was no popcorn grown in Japan, so he began growing popcorn on his farms in the warmer months and brought a packaging plant from the United States to package popcorn throughout the winter months in a shed on his own farm. This issue which started out as a problem quickly turned around to be a brilliant opportunity

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to be able employ quality staff on a fulltime basis and be the first and only popcorn grower in Japan. This has been mutually beneficial and profitable for Shigeo. As shown through Shigeo's experiences, it takes someone with an entrepreneurial mindset, grit and perseverance to make a bold step to turn a problem into an opportunity.

Emma Brown from "Amungee Mungee" (mentioned above) said that the vast amount of poly pipe her husband Adrian and herself needed for their farm was going to be extremely expensive, mainly due to the freight costs of getting the 100kms of pipe to their remote station. Adrian could see an opportunity to begin manufacturing poly pipe for their own use and others at their closest town, Katherine. Adrian's poly pipe business, Elsam Pipes has now grown into a large manufacturing company producing thousands of kilometres of poly pipe, mainly for remote stations, including their own.

Optimism

Regarding optimism, your attitude will always determine your altitude. Optimism ensures a positive attitude, even when facing challenges and overcoming problems. It also gives one the ability to pursue opportunities. Optimism was observed through my scholarship travels.

"Optimism is defined as a belief that future outcomes will generally (not always) be positive. Conversely, pessimism is more about doubt and the belief that things will not go in your favour. Theories of positive psychology suggest that what you think and speak will indeed become fact" (Langabeer, 2022).

With Colin Burnett, a 2018 Nuffield Scholar from Julia Creek, Queensland (QLD), Australia I visited Etta Plains Station, where he had some earth moving gear contracting for the new owners. They had property further south in NSW and saw an opportunity to expand into central west Queensland, between the Flinders and Cloncurry rivers. This was a very brave, bold, pioneering move on their behalf, fuelled by optimism, which entailed turning a cattle station into an irrigated cotton property. They purchased the 28,442ha property (with a 32,000 megalitre water allocation) for AUD\$25 million. Without their level of optimism and trust in their calculated risk, this opportunity would have passed them by. As the old saying goes, *a good idea does not care who gets it*. Optimistic people can focus on what is to be achieved without becoming distracted by others' doubts. In this case, doubts about growing cotton successfully in Northwest QLD have been debunked.

Paul McLaughlin from Desert Farms, Ali Curung, in the NT was a man with great optimism and a keen eye for opportunities. Paul moved to Ali Curung in the desert 300km north of Alice Springs to carve out an irrigated watermelon farm. He has a very optimistic view of life; it is almost like successful individuals with a keen sense of optimism can smell an opportunity in the wind (and have the confidence to pursue it). Paul had a farm at Condobolin but moved north to grow two melon crops a year, and to also lift his production from 50 tonne (t) to 85t per ha.

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Figure 5: Ali Curung (Source: Author)

Shigeo Meada, of Hokkaido, Japan was a man of optimism. This was displayed first-hand in his confidence in purchasing Japan's first popcorn packaging facility from the USA, with no prior popcorn making experience. Historically, there was no popcorn grown in Japan because it is a cooler climate, and because Japan is not a big popcorn eating society. Shigeo could see, optimistically, a market for popcorn emerging in his country. He was the man who took the calculated risk and had a go. Shigeo said that he was trying to fix a problem, and this is what successful people do well, he says, "If you are fearful of making a mistake, you will never learn the skills required to enable you to know your limitations" (Meada, 2022).

Passion

Bill Back, a property manager from Hillston, NSW, introduced me to what is called the "Sigmoid curve" (see Figure 4, below). This is a very interesting visual picture of one's career path over time. It has been observed for generations where one embarks on an exciting career path with great passion. The passion for the task or career could be best described as a firework. It begins small and then passionately erupts into a blaze of glory but can eventually fizzle, leaving just wisps of smoke and a memory of something that was once fun, spectacular, and exciting. Generally, individuals find the "S" curve passionately fun while it is moving upwards but over time momentum is difficult to maintain if there are not opportunities for challenge, variety or growth. For example, a young lad or girl finishes school and finds a job as a station hand; they find it fulfills the dreams they have had for many years growing up. They do this for several years and are skilled at what they do, they get to their early 30s and feel like they have been in the same role for many years and the shine is beginning to dull on the passion they once had for the task. This is the first point in the "S" curve that needs to be considered, the point at which a change needs to occur to reinvigorate passion and enthusiasm. Change is not easy, people naturally resist change, but it is vitally important. Keeping passion in agriculture alive and vibrant requires learning new skills to embark on new ventures as is indicated by the red line in the Sigmoid curve. This might look like the transition from station hand to overseer, overseer to station

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manager, station manager to station owner (or changing employers, enterprises or location). Each new phase has an element of fear, moving from level to level but the rewards are worth it, and serve to maintain the passion and momentum. Missing the opportunities to make changes and reinvigorate can be detrimental.

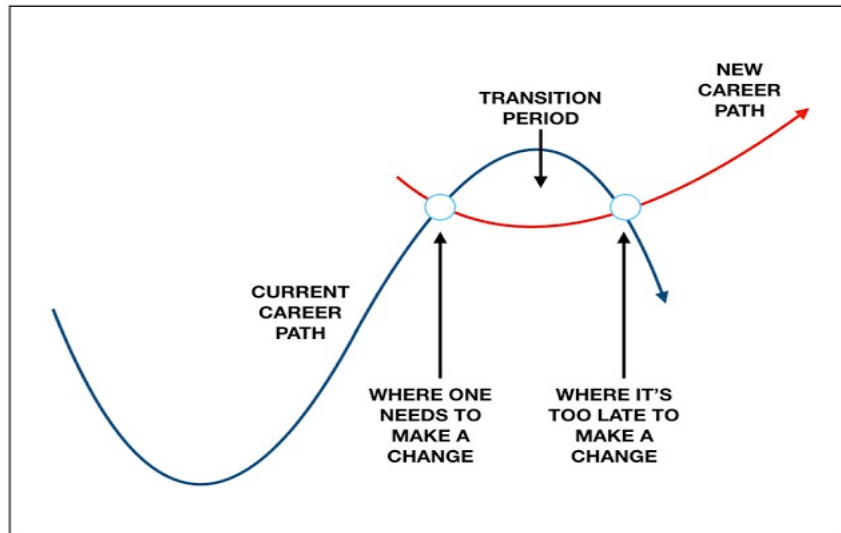


Figure 6: Sigmoid Curve (Source: Gee, 2019)

Volleman's Wildcat family-owned dairy in Texas, USA exuded passion. Frank Volleman was confronted with a choice in his early days whilst operating his small dairy in the Netherlands. He had to choose between staying in the Netherlands and always being a small-time dairy farmer with little opportunity for growth and expansion or to move to Texas and expand more than 100x in size over a relatively short number of years. Frank encountered the "transition period" as pictured in Figure 4 (sigmoid curve) and had a choice make. 1. Always do what he always did or 2. Take a "New career path", and he chose the "New career path". Without Franks continuous, decision, he could quiet possibly be still milking the 40 cows in the Netherlands. Since his "transition Period" of change to his "New career path" he now milks 5000 cows on 4000 acres, use 10,000 tonne of corn per year, produce 8 tanker loads of milk per day, & bottle 50,000 bottles of milk per day. People like Frank priorities passion over fear, change over stagnation to continually pursue "New career paths" before they find themselves leaving the decision to change all to hard / late.

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Figure 7: Author in Vollemans Dairy, Texas (Source: Author)

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Chapter 3: Understand the role of culture and relationships in building an effective business model

This final chapter relates to Culture (focusing on people and relationships) and its role in creating a successful business. Culture relates to the feel of a place, influenced by attitudes, practices and behaviours, and is ultimately, what other people say it is based on their experience. *“Culture matters because it boosts productivity, agility, employee engagement and innovation. A strong workplace culture precedes business results” (Razzetti, 2023).*

“Culture eats strategy for breakfast’ is a famous quote from legendary management consultant and writer Peter Drucker. To be clear, he didn’t mean that strategy was unimportant – rather that a powerful and empowering culture was a surer route to organisational success”.

Paul McLaughlin from *Desert Farms* near Ali Curung in the NT, spoke about the importance of culture within one's business. His view was *‘culture is the unwritten law of an organisation and people will either adapt to the culture or question the culture’* (McLaughlin, 2021). Paul also spoke about the importance of having a culture in place where your employees are batting for you and have your back, especially when you are not present. His number one rule when employing someone new is to employ those that are teachable and predictable. *“The art of success is to get people to take ownership of what they are doing”,* and this will occur within the right culture.

Andrew Fowler reinforced this message about culture; *“You have to create a really positive culture if you want to retain people and they have got to enjoy being at work and enjoy each other’s company”* (Fowler, 2023). The growth of Andrew’s business has been all about people, people management, and building high performing teams. Pay is not the main draw card to work for Fowlers, culture is.

Chris Johns from Glenthorne Station, South Island, New Zealand (NZ), believes if you begin with a good culture, it is easy for someone coming in to catch on. Employees will replicate what they encounter in a workplace, so having a positive and productive culture in place means you are more likely to have new employees join that culture. Chris values transparency in his culture and seeks to make sure all employees voices are heard. *“If someone is really not happy, you need to sit them down and have a conversation”* (Johns, 2023). Chris also explained it is very important to be straight with people, no beating around the bush. Whilst at Glenthorne, Chris and his wife, Jo went through their six-monthly questionnaires, which they discuss with each of their staff members privately. This questionnaire is not only to gauge how their staff are performing but also how well they are performing as employers. It is very easy, Jo believes, for an employer to analyse their staff and pick out their faults or areas that need to be improved but it is more important to be seen by your staff as genuinely wanting to improve yourself also. Understanding your people and growing one’s skills in the area of being an employer of choice is paramount if you are aiming to run a successful business for decades to come.

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Like Chris and Jo at Glenthorne, Fritz Bolten, 2021 Nuffield scholar, Kunnanurra WA believed in modelling what you want to see in your employees. For him, he talked about leading by example. Fritz was extremely open with his staff and was willing to share his failings and let them know that he is not perfect either. Staff are encouraged to share their mistakes, learn from their actions, and fix any shortcomings. He focusses on addressing and overcoming issues rather than getting stuck on mistakes. (Bolten, 2023). Amy Cronin, Nuffield Scholar from Canada, said her 24-48 hour rule allows her to pause and carefully reflect on the situation and the most appropriate and productive way to address it. She can then go back to the individual with a plan in place to manage the situation and the challenges, while working towards a successful outcome.(Cronin, 2020)

Good people and good relationships

A positive culture is underpinned by positive relationships. Understanding the importance of these positive relationships, in many and varied ways is imperative to creating and building a successful business.

When traveling, of note was that each business owner or manager had great people skills and built great relationships. In order to grow any business, this is a vital ingredient for success. One constant seen in agricultural circles around the world was that successful businesses are looking for great people. Great people are often not easily come by, and many businesses are competing for the same type of person or as one farmer said, *we're all fishing from the same pool*.

Gerard Hines, director of Delta Agribusiness, a rural inputs and advisory service from Young, NSW, Australia shared that within their business of 300 staff and 43 stores, *good people always pay for themselves*. Gerard was so intent on staffing well that he said that he was always willing to wait for the right person to fill a vacancy/position within their business than to rush and fulfill the position with an average person. He believes, good people always attract good people; having the right people on staff helps with positive relationships and maintaining the right culture.

Attracting and keeping good staff is a challenge not only in the case of Delta Agriculture, but it is also a common one for production agriculture; whether it is filling seasonal roles (such as harvest positions) or trying to find more permanent members of the team. Creating a culture people would like to be a part of is one key factor, coupled with some of the factors above, such as transparency, modelling and building good relationships within your business and beyond. Another carrot for attracting and keeping good people is finding ways to value add for your staff.

One example of value adding for employees is the model at Align Farms in NZ who milk 5000 cows across 6 dairies with lots of staff. Rhys Roberts (Align Farms Manager) had a ½ labour unit employed just to manage the farm (staff) vegetable garden. How cool is that? Rhys said that his staff collectively received the value of NZD\$50,000 of vegetables from their farm (for free) each year. Rhys was a strong believer in *what you buy for your staff rarely gets remembered; people value your time and effort more than they do your money*.

Valued people bring value (Roberts, 2023)

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Rhys had some very helpful pieces of advice especially regarding attracting and retaining staff, many of which link to culture and relationships. Here are just a few:

- Ensure you have well maintained housing.
- Have and use technology within the business
- Have good, safe vehicles.
- Maintain high safety standards
- Model the standards you expect to see as an employer/manager the standard you walk past is the standard others will accept.
- Focus on people leadership, NOT people management.
- Look for quality people first, you can always teach skills
- Having a common purpose and vision is important. Businesses that do the best have a simple vision and that informs a good, healthy culture.
- Enjoyment and fulfillment are critical.
- Create genuine opportunities for growth, people want to grow within and with your business.
- Understand the leadership structures, opportunities and potential in your business
- Value self-reflective people are important
- Resilience is very, very important
- Bin assumptions and ask questions.
- Get outside your industry and learn in the people space.

Above, Rhys refers to maintaining high safety standards as one factor important to keep good people. The most extreme form of Workplace Health and Safety (WHS) protecting staff from harm was at an agricultural research and development station in southern Arava, Israel. There, our research guide, Mr. Motti Harriei explained that in the 1960s they had farm staff getting shot by snipers from over the border in Jordan. The cost of protecting the staff while out on irrigation runs was expensive so they developed some of the world's first automated underground drip irrigation. In their case, doing the best for their staff opened-up a whole new agricultural initiative of underground drip irrigation.



Figure 8: Arava, Israel (Source: Author)

Associate with those you want to become like

Positive relationships that grow a business to succeed are not only relationships with employees. Learning is a large part of becoming successful, and much of this comes from the relationships and associations we have with a range of industry and business colleagues and partners. Surrounding yourself with those you want to become like is essential for gaining knowledge and wisdom in areas of interest. Successful businesspeople can be mentors or coaches, sharing their own skills, experience, and providing guidance. When open to this information, it can provide a way for individuals and businesses to develop, grow, reach goals and full potential. When advice is then applied it can improve a business.

At a Berkshire Hathaway shareholder meeting in Omaha, Nebraska in 2004, Warren Buffet offered this advice to a young audience member, "It's better to hang out with people better than you. Pick out associates whose behaviour is better than yours and you'll drift in that direction."

Paul McLaughlin, "Desert Farms" said that he, along with 6 other like-minded people in similar businesses decided to form an advisory board for each their collective businesses. Each of these 6 individuals treated these 6 farms owned by each member of the advisory board like their own. They met together every second month and invested their accumulated knowledge and experience into seeing each business succeed and go to the next level. In associating with individuals in which each of them aspired to become like, they were enabled to grow, reach their goals, and flourish. (McLaughlin, 2021)

Conclusion

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There is much research into financial literacy and good farming practices and how they contribute to a successful agricultural business; this scholarship, however, has focused on the inter and intra-personal qualities that ensure a productive and profitable business. It has prioritised relationships and the employment of effective personal traits to build and sustain a healthy enterprise that succeeds off the back of individual and collective endeavour within the business.

Success looks different to everyone. It can be measured by finances, how many hours worked in the week, or positive relationships in business and private life but each individual and each business needs to define what success is for them. The act and process of establishing an explicit vision is critically important; it informs decision making because choices can be cross-referenced with the purpose and goals of the business, as well as helping define success.

Enabling sustainable and balanced personal wellbeing while engaged in day-to-day activities is key to building and maintaining a successful business. In addition to measuring success against the vision and goals of the business, success can also be defined when viewed in terms of balance. Having a balance of work and life is crucial to the personal wellbeing of everyone in the business. The sustainability of the balance you create in your personal life can reflect onto your business and overall success.

Keeping sustainability at the forefront of the business involves possessing and applying certain behaviours and mindsets. Understanding the traits and skills required to operate a business with his vital; discipline, curiosity, humility, vulnerability, seeing problems as opportunities, and optimism and passion are key traits and skills required to build and maintain a successful business.

Culture and relationships also play pivotal roles in business success. The culture within a business profoundly influences attitudes, practices, and behaviors, shaping how everyone within the business interacts, collaborates, and drives the organization toward its goals. They directly affect performance, decision-making and overall success. Each business is able to deliberately determine what they want their culture to be, and time taken to do this is time well spent.

Good people and good relationships are key, and this is found through associating with those you want to become like. "There is no such thing as a self-made man. You will reach your goals only with the help of others," (Shinn, 1994).

Recommendations

One of the paths to a successful business is to explicitly know and understand the purpose, values and goals of one's business. It is recommended businesses commit time to the following:

1. Determine the business' purpose -why are you doing what you are doing?
2. Define what success looks like for you and your business.
3. Establish a clear vision with goals to enable you to achieve your purpose.
4. Consciously manage your work-life balance and create positive boundaries to enable a sustainable and healthy balance into the future.
5. Identify mentors and opportunities that can contribute to your individual and business growth and success.
6. Cultivate Relationships – valued people bring value.
7. Create a healthy culture within your team.

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Appendix 1

Questions asked

The questions asked in interviews included, but were not limited to the following:

Personal Questions

1. What's a balanced life look like to you?
2. What does self-care look like to you?
3. How much importance do you place on family time and what's that look like to you?
4. Give me 3 words that you believe best describe yourself.
5. Have you had times where you've felt like giving up and how have you overcome these challenging times?
6. Has there been a moment in time where you have felt like you have made it or arrived?

Business Structure Questions

1. How did you get a start in business?
2. What advice could you give to someone starting out with nothing into agriculture?
3. How has your role within your business evolved and changed over time?
4. What are your key performance indicators (KPIs) and ROAM within your business?
5. What's momentum within your business feel like, look like?
6. What aspect of your business do you feel needs the greatest improvement.
7. How many hours per week do you work and what do you classify as work?
8. Delegation. How have you handled this and what's your advice upon your experience?

Learning and Development

1. What is your educational background?
2. Who are your closest associates? (You show me your friends and I'll show you your future)
3. How much emphasis do you put on educating yourself and what's this look like?

Philosophies on life

1. What are 7 core values you live by?

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2. Philanthropy. Where's your heartbeat sit on this one?

3. If you had your time over, what 1 decision would you have made differently in hindsight that may have had a lasting impact for the years proceeding?

4. What are 3 important insights that you could share with myself/others that would make a big impact within my/our lives.

5. How would you best describe success from your perspective and life's journey?

Extras

What qualities are you looking for in people/staff?